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Everything he thought he knew, everything he had fought for, sacrificed, and believed in, shattered like fragile glass, leaving him standing in the wreckage of a truth too painful to bear.

"I don't see why you're so upset. She was in my way," Carla says casually with a shrug. "I did what had to be done, and it doesn't even affect our plan. You wouldn't have known if Hunter hadn't blocked my damn card like a coward." Her gaze hardens as her voice rises. "And if that lowlife hadn't demanded more money... I shouldn't have hired him. But what's done is done. I just need some cash to settle the debt, and I'll be on my way."

"What's done is done?" The man sitting across from her repeats, his voice low and dangerous. His chair scrapes violently against the floor as he stands, rounding the desk with slow, deliberate steps toward her. "Do you even realize what you've done?"

Carla, momentarily taken aback by the sharpness of his tone, forces a smile and shrugs. "I mean, it doesn't ruin your plan, so what's the big deal?"

Before she can finish, his hand shoots out,

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wrapping around her throat and slamming her hard against the wall. The force of the impact knocks the air from her lungs, leaving her gasping for breath. His grip tightens as he brings his face inches from hers, his eyes burning with fury.

"Complete that sentence," he hisses, "and the last thing you'll hear before you die is the sound of your neck snapping."

Carla's eyes widen in terror. The smug confidence she had vanished, replaced by raw panic. She claws at his hands, her nails digging into his skin, but he's too strong, his grip too tight. Her vision blurs as her lungs scream for air, her skin flushing red.

But the man wasn't bothered. Instead, he leans in even closer, his breath hot against her face. "Do you have any idea how reckless you've been? How reckless you've always been?" His fingers press harder against her throat, cutting off what little air she's managed to gasp.

Her legs kick out weakly, her hands slap against his wrist, her heart racing in fear. Just when she thinks she's about to pass out, he suddenly lets go. Carla collapses to the floor like a sack of potatoes, gasping and coughing, her chest heaving as she struggles to fill her lungs with air.

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The man paces in front of her, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "You never think, do you?" His voice is tight with anger. "You act without thought, and now your mess can be traced back to you. And from you, it leads straight to me." He points to himself, his voice now loud and accusatory.

Carla lifts her head weakly, still rubbing her bruised throat. "That won't happen," she rasps, her voice barely audible.

"Oh really? Tell me why." His tone is mocking. "Because they already found Estelle's location. It's only a matter of time before she's rescued. And when they catch the man you hired, do you think he won't name you? And what then? Do you think I trust you to keep your mouth shut?"

Carla's blood runs cold at the realization. They're close to finding Estelle, and if the man she hired is arrested, there's no telling what he might say under pressure. She doesn't trust the lowlife to keep his mouth shut. She stares up at him, her fear palpable.

"I thought so," he says, his lip curling in disgust. With a final decision, he commands, "You'll disappear now. Out of sight, out of reach. If I hear your name again, I'll make sure it's the last time

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anyone does. Do I make myself clear?"

Carla nods frantically, her body trembling as she scrambles to her feet. She stumbles out of the

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room, her heart pounding with the terrifying knowledge that he's not bluffing. She's seen what he's capable of, and she knows too well that he'd kill her without hesitation.

The police had moved quickly once they tracked Estelle's location through her smartwatch. The realization that something as simple as a watch

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could've saved her sooner—and yet no one had thought about it until now—surprises and infuriates Hunter. He understands that he and Estelle's family were too stunned to think of it, but the police? Incompetent fools. Fortunately, he had overheard the update from a security guard and planned to discreetly follow the rescue team, but his impatience grew as he waited for Dave to arrive.

Glancing at his watch, Hunter groaned in frustration and pulled out his phone to call Dave again. Just then, his phone buzzed with a message notification. He opened it, and his breath caught in his throat.

What? How come?

His account balance had taken a heavy blow—someone had withdrawn a massive sum of money. Carla. It had to be her since he didn't make the withdrawal. But how? He had blocked her card. There was no way she could've accessed his account, unless—

s**t. He'd left his credit card at home.

His anger boiled over. How dare she? After everything he'd done to limit her reckless spending, she still found a way to steal from him.

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Any sympathy he had felt for her the night before vanished, replaced with a fury so intense he couldn't think straight.

He pocketed his phone and stormed out of his office. As soon as the elevator doors slid open, he came face to face with Dave, who was panting heavily. "You're leaving already?" Dave asked, trying to catch his breath.

Hunter didn't respond. His jaw clenched tightly, and his mind raced with thoughts of Carla tampering with his money. *What was she going to do with such a huge amount by the way?* He was too consumed by anger to speak, even as they drove to his house in tense silence.

"Carla!" he bellowed the moment he stepped inside. Mara was at school, so he didn't bother holding back. His voice echoed through the empty halls, dripping with fury.

"Uh, is something going on?" Dave asked, trailing behind him. "You're doing that thing with your jaw again—you know, the one you do when you're pissed. What did Carla do this time?"

Ignoring him again, Hunter shouted Carla's name as he charged up the stairs, his steps heavy with purpose. He burst into her room but stopped dead

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in his tracks.

"What the—?" Hunter muttered, his eyes scanning the mess.

The room was a disaster. The bed was unmade, clothes were scattered all over the floor, and the mirror on the dresser was shattered. He hadn't slept in this room for a while, ever since he and Carla had started drifting apart. However, seeing the chaos in the room that used to be his left him speechless.

"Wow! Did a tornado hit here? I knew she was a handful, but I didn't think she was the messy type," Dave quipped, his eyes widening at the sight.

Hunter called Carla's name once more, but there was no answer. He reached for his phone to dial her, but it went straight to voicemail. Where the hell is she? He clenched his fists, seething with anger.

If she's not at home and just made a withdrawal, then the only place she could be is out somewhere, which would explain why her phone isn't reachable. His insides burned with rage, and just as he turned to leave, his gaze shifted to the dresser, where something white and crumpled caught his eye. He walked over and picked up the

paper, unfolding it with a frown. His eyes skimmed the words hastily scribbled across the page, and his heart dropped.

What the...?

With a shaky hand, he dropped the first paper and grabbed the second, neatly folded underneath. His eyes darted across the text, disbelief and shock setting in as he read.

"What's going on?" Dave asked, noticing the change in his friend's demeanour. Upon receiving no response from Hunter, who stood with his hands limply at his side and head bowed, Dave picked up the discarded paper. "What does it say?"

Hunter didn't respond. He couldn't trust his voice to speak, judging by the emotion coursing through his veins, tearing through his heart. His hands shook violently at his sides, crunching the paper while he fought back the tears that threatened to spill.

Dave glanced at the paper, his eyes widening in horror. "Oh, s**t," he muttered. "Mara... isn't yours?"

Hunter felt the world crumble beneath him at the confirmation of what he'd read. Suddenly, the room seemed to close in on him, his chest tightened, as the impact of the truth hit him in full

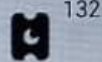
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force. Everything he thought he knew, everything he had sacrificed—it was all a lie. Mara wasn't his. His legs gave way, and he fell onto the floor, but he barely registered the pain, nor did he seem to notice the tear that managed to slip past his eyes.


Mara isn't mine?



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